

Atomic Testing

In a recent letter to the *New York Times*, Professor Linus Pauling stated that the five years of nuclear bomb testing have released enough carbon 14 to produce one million defective children.

It is not sufficient to answer that Prof. Pauling has belonged to some leftist organizations. Many scientists have been politically naive in the past few years, but that gives us no reason to suppose that a scientist of Prof. Pauling's standing would distort his scientific calculations in a field in which he is not naive. On a similar issue, Prof. Pauling had the support of a group of more than 9,000 scientists.

Discussion in official circles regularly plays down the injurious effects of nuclear tests. It is regularly assumed by most opinion-forming agencies that the official scientists have the right of way in this matter and that the burden of proof should fall on their critics. Surely this is wrong: the burden of proof should fall on the optimistic scientists who, in this area of uncertain knowledge, continue to assume that the risks to the future of the race should be taken lightly.

The real issue may not have to do with the facts, that is, the facts about carbon 14 which have been stated only a short time ago and the many other facts of the living which have been cited often. Rather, the real issue may be the tendency of the official scientists to speak in averages or percentages to disguise the human realities which are involved.

Professor Teller speaks of the average loss of several days of life for each individual but, since some individuals are more affected than others, this is a trick to disguise the realities. Often it is said that while fallout will produce a number of deformed children in the future, these will be only a small percentage of all future children and, in any case, we shall never know which these are because there will be many other children deformed for other reasons.

This type of argument indicates an extraordinary reversal of moral assumptions. To become insensitive to the injurious effects of what we do to a large number of people because it is a *relatively* small number is a great departure from everything that Christians have believed in the past.

The Communists, whose ruthlessness is the excuse

for most of our actions, sacrifice living persons to a future political goal. We sacrifice future persons to a present political goal. In both cases, there is an officially induced insensitivity. Since we are Christians and humanists, we disguise from ourselves the realities, and this is easy because the victims belong to the future. The American churches stand by and say almost nothing about this reversal of moral assumptions among

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This journal has always been devoted to the kind of moral realism that seeks to avoid a single-track type of moral argument. There are many other considerations that policy-makers have to take into account. . . . [But] the protest here is not against our taking other considerations into account: it is against the successful efforts of the government to keep this consideration—concerning the genetic effects of nuclear tests—from being taken seriously.

Also, when we choose a course that is known to have injurious consequences for some people because that is the only way of preventing injurious consequences for yet other people, we need to be more sure of our calculations than now seems possible in this case. It is first argued that the future effects of the tests will be small compared to the future effects of a general nuclear war; and then it is asserted that the tests are important for the prevention of such a war.

But this second claim is becoming more problematic every day. If we were really sensitive to the future effects of the tests, we would try much harder to find an alternative set of policies to prevent the war. More important, the continuation of the nuclear armament race is almost certain to provoke the feared general war as the element of accidents becomes more dangerous and as nuclear power increases. There are questions of timing on which equally sensitive persons may differ in the present situation, but as we shape policy for the immediate future the realities about the human effects of the continuation should be allowed to have their full effects on the conscience of the nation.

(J.C.B. in *Christianity and Crisis*, June 9, 1958)

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